



DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

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FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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LAKE HURON WHITEFISH AT ALARMING LOW POINT

Lake Huron whitefish, the most valuable food fish in the lake, may be destined to follow other Great Lakes species into commercial extinction, according to fishery biologists of the Fish and Wildlife Service, United States Department of the Interior.

The American waters of Lake Huron yielded 255,000 pounds of whitefish in 1939--only 46 percent of the '38 catch of 558,000 pounds. The 1938 catch, incidentally, was only a little above the all-time low annual catch for the lake.

Thus, the 1939 figure "constitutes an alarmingly low point in this fishery", says the recent analysis of commercial fishing statistics of the State of Michigan completed by the Service in its continuing compilation of evidence of the depletion of Huron's lake whitefish.

"The present decline in abundance of the whitefish in Lake Huron", the report continues, "began with the introduction of the disastrously efficient 'deep trap net' in 1929, which coincided with a pronounced upturn in the natural abundance of whitefish. The deep trap net, equipped with a cubical lifting crib or pot as great as 50 feet on a side, could be set in waters more than 120 feet in depth, and could be moved readily from place to place in order to fish wherever whitefish were more abundant. Prior to the introduction of the deep trap net, whitefish were taken principally with inshore pound nets and with highly selective large-meshed gill nets."

Statistics for the six fishing districts in Lake Huron for the years 1930 to 1939 illustrate how effective this new set proved to be, not only in producing whitefish, but in catching too many whitefish. The deep trap net was first used in the second northernmost district of Lake Huron and was instrumental in causing the peak catch there during 1930. With its gradual spread to the two adjacent districts, peak productions were obtained in these areas during 1931. During subsequent years the deep trap net fishery expanded to the southern three districts of the lake. As a result maximum yields were obtained in 1932 in the fourth district, 1933 in the fifth, and in 1934 in the sixth or southernmost district.

Following 1934, the whitefish fishery of the entire lake has continued to decline and, in 1935, the use of the deep trap net was restricted to waters less than 80 feet in depth by a new Michigan law. The new regulation was designed to place the deep trap net on a more comparable basis with the less mobile pound net, and to serve some areas of the lake beyond the reach of this very efficient type of gear. The new regulation, however, brought no improvement in the fishery. Biologists believe that the seeds of disaster were sown during the years 1930 to 1934 when the deep trap net caused overproduction through overfishing.

"It is not possible to forecast", says the report's analysts, "whether or not there is any hope for the future recovery of the whitefish fishery of Lake Huron. The continuous decline in production that has taken place since 1934 is not a favorable sign and the Fish and Wildlife Service believes that the all-time low catch of whitefish in Lake Huron during 1939 should be viewed with apprehension."

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